

NAMI Ohio Offers Training for Jails and Court Personnel to Communities in Ohio

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This is the fourth article in a series about effectively dealing with mentally ill offenders in the criminal justice system. Justice Evelyn Lundberg Stratton, Supreme Court of Ohio, has had a longtime interest in developing solutions to this problem and has formed the Supreme Court of Ohio Advisory Committee on Mentally Ill in the Courts for that purpose. This fourth article, written by a member of that committee, addresses NAMI Ohio's contribution to this issue via the development of a training program for jails and court personnel.

The need for training and education programs for jails and court personnel is widely recognized and documented. We know that a significant percentage of inmates in jails are suffering from serious mental illness, and many are involved in the criminal justice system due to the deinstitutionalization of thousands of mentally ill persons released from state hospitals over the past 40 years.

There is a general acknowledgment that the courts are inundated with a number of misdemeanor cases that are a direct result of mental illness and not because of an intent to break the law.

Over the past year, NAMI Ohio has developed a training program designed to equip front line staff in jails and courts as they deal with this growing problem. This training program addresses the problems created over the past 40 years within the criminal justice system of Ohio as related to the transition from state mental hospitals as primary facilities for treatment and housing of citizens with brain disorders, to a community-based mental health system. This problem has accelerated since the passage of the Mental Health Act of 1988.

This training program will have a major impact in lessening the burden on a criminal justice system dealing with difficult-to-treat citizens with brain disorders. This training delivers a comprehensive training curriculum to jails and court personnel to assist them in identifying and dealing more effectively with this unique population.

This effort recognizes that personnel working within the criminal justice are often insufficiently trained in how to deal with persons whose disruptive, bizarre and/or criminal behavioral may be due to their mental illness. Because of the shift to community-based treatment and related increases in this population within Ohio communities, need for training in this area has become acute. News reports of inmates with a history of mental illness who go untreated or inadequately treated, or who experience violence and even death at the hands of untrained jail personnel or other inmates, have become tragically frequent.

Deinstitutionalization

The primary goal of this program is to help educate jails and court personnel in safe, humane and effective management of persons manifesting behaviors symptomatic of major brain disorders.

The targeted population, already large, will continue to grow until meaningful programs are in place to prevent individuals with brain disorders from becoming permanently homeless and/or periodically involved in the justice system.

Over the past 40 years, the system of public mental health facilities established and maintained with state and local government funding has undergone dramatic change. In 1955, state mental hospitals held 559,000 patients. Growth estimates proportional to the country's population increase to 265 million by 1996, projected that total inpatients would have increased to almost 900,000. This growth was not realized due to the deinstitutionalization movement of intervening decades. The population of state hospital inpatients is now less than 70,000.

The deinstitutionalization process, which was to give greater recognition to patient rights and make treatment for mentally ill persons more humane, produced unforeseen circumstances. State hospitals have closed, driven primarily by economic consideration, while promised community-based treatment programs and facilities are inadequately funded and staffed. At present, 3.5 million Americans suffer from a serious brain disorder: 2.2 million with schizophrenia and 1.3 million with bipolar disorder. It is estimated that, on any given day, 1.4 million are not receiving any treatment.

The failure of deinstitutionalization, coupled with related issues (such as laws intended to guard civil liberties of the mentally ill), have combined to create a large group of individuals with a serious and untreated brain disorder. This group represents the core factor in two of today's most pressing social problems: homelessness and the criminal justice system overload experienced in our courts, jails, and prisons.

Although it is difficult to measure accurately the population of individuals with serious brain disorders that are homeless, incarcerated, or in the community subject to court supervision, recent surveys have provided data that indicate the following:

- 283,000 are in jails and prisons
- 543,000 are on probation in the community
- 200,000 are homeless

While these data are estimates only, there is little doubt that the composite size of these groups is significant, probably between 750,000 and 1,000,000. This would make the target group, in terms of a national health problem, comparable to the population of 787,000 AIDS victims. It should be mentioned that the target population includes treatment-resistant cases in which the ill individuals neither recognize nor understand their illness. Possibly 50% of all the nation's 2.2 million persons suffering from

schizophrenia are in this category. It thus appears that the difficult-to-treat form a growing population that must be dealt with before we can expect significant progress in dealing with the problems of homelessness and overpopulation in jails in prisons.

Addressing The Need

To date, the NAMI Ohio Jails and Court Personnel Training has been presented to 126 attendees in full day sessions across Ohio. Participants have included corrections personnel, parole officers, jail medical staff, sheriff's deputies, Children's Services staff and others. A separate session was held in Columbus for a group of psychiatrists who will serve as resources for the project. In addition, a presentation was made to the Ohio Community Forensic Association, a group comprised of professionals working with forensic mental health issues in local communities.

Program participants report to us that the prevalence of persons with mental illness and substance abuse issues – and co-occurring disorders – among local jail inmates is even higher than published studies might indicate. National prevalence rates (16% according to the Department of Justice) would indicate that nearly 3,000 of Ohio's nearly 18,000 local jail prisoners have diagnosable mental illnesses.

What we have learned from participants in our program is that the situation is much more serious. Participants tell us that the revolving door of incarceration, poverty and crime is real; that 60 to 70 percent of the persons in their jails have mental health, substance abuse or co-occurring disorders; and that is made manifest because they already know the vast majority of persons arrested in their communities based on prior encounters. Persons with mental illness are routinely referred to as frequent flyers in the criminal justice system.

The NAMI Ohio Jails and Court Personnel Training succeeds because it was created as a partnership and includes partnership dynamics and respect for the knowledge of the participants themselves throughout the curriculum.

During program development, we were fortunate to not only have funding from the Ohio State Bar Association and the Ohio Department of Mental Health, but also the expertise of court system and ODMH personnel who reviewed training manual drafts and supported our curriculum planning.

Each program is team-taught by a representative of law enforcement, a mental health professional when available, and a NAMI Ohio Trainer. Although each participant receives an 80-page manual, the majority of the training day is spent working through interactive exercises in small groups. Key to the success of the small groups is that the participants themselves bring their real world, day-to-day knowledge to the session. In reality, our program encourages participants to train each other.

NAMI Ohio continues to commit its resources to serving persons with serious mental illness and support their families in a variety of settings throughout the state. By developing the tools to assist the front line staff in Ohio's criminal justice system, we can reduce the burden on the system created by a lack of understanding of the illness, while helping save the lives of our citizens suffering with the most severe mental disabilities.

For additional information on the NAMI Ohio Jails and Court Personnel Training program, please contact Muriel Jeffries, Director of Special Projects, NAMI Ohio, 747 East Broad Street, Columbus, Ohio 43205. (614) 224-2700 amiohio@amiohio.org

June 2002